MUSEUM REVIEW

Rethinking Space, Light, and Pedagogy

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THE OPENING OF THE NEW GREEK AND ROMAN GALLERIES AT THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK, 17–20 APRIL 2007, organized by Carlos Picón.

Like many scholars of my generation, I have followed the vicissitudes of the Metropolitan Museum's classical collections over the past 40 years.[1] Beginning with the conversion of the Roman Court to a restaurant in 1954, the collection has been the victim of one space-squeeze after another: the second-floor Etruscan galleries disappeared in the 1980s, when, illogically, the Greek vases migrated upstairs, divorced from the sculpture and bronzes. Even at that, except for the temporary but spectacular display of the Euphronios krater after its acquisition in 1972, the vases were crowded into antiquated cabinets and difficult to study. But the later classical collections suffered even more, being in large part relegated to storage for nearly two decades.

The opening of the galleries devoted to Hellenistic, Roman, and Etruscan art is both long-awaited and welcome.[2] It is the culmination of a 17-year process that began with the refurbishing of the Greek galleries, beautifully realized by the firm of Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo and Associates and opened to the public in 1999. At that time, most of the Roman objects disappeared from view. Until then, in a selective but crowded display, Roman art had a home in what is now the Belfer Court, an airy space occupying the entire width of the wing where the temporal sequence now begins with Minoan, Bronze Age, and Geometric art. For years, the Boscoreale *cubiculum*, housed in the corner of the grand entry hall just before the entrance to the Belfer Court, constituted a kind of prelude to the Roman collection. Now there is a tiny gift shop in that space.

The Greek galleries to either side of the Greek sculpture court—the central, axial path to the Roman Court—focus almost exclusively on Attic art and set expectations for the new wing. When one considers the earlier segregation of Greek vases from the other works in the collections, the mix of media and scale here within each chronological period is a notable feature of the display. Well-designed plate glass cases with glass shelves suspended by an ingenious system of chrome rods encourage close viewing from all angles. Both the chronological sequence and display solutions adopted in the Greek galleries in 1999 prefigure those employed in the new Hellenistic and Roman galleries, where curator Carlos Picón's philosophy of mixing media and artistic genres becomes more complex and enticing.

The prelude to the feast is the transverse space that crosses the axis of the Greek sculpture court and is now devoted to Hellenistic sculpture and architecture. At its center, viewers will recognize an old friend in the great Ionic base and capital from Sardis (fig. 1). Even so, it is a peculiar object to represent Hellenistic architecture, being monumental yet strangely truncated without the column shaft. To the left, a one-and-a-half times life-sized bronze portrait statue dominates the space. It rivals the so-called Hellenistic Ruler from the Museo Nazionale in Rome for its quality and state of preservation and has been conjectured to depict a Pergamene ruler. Like several other spectacular sculptures on display, it is loaned from the Leon Levy and Shelby White collection and lacks provenance and cultural context.[3] On the wall near the great bronze is a shelf devoted to fine marble portrait heads that effectively convey the huge range of emotional expressions characterizing Hellenistic portraiture. A beautifully preserved Late Hellenistic bronze statue of a man stands nearby; although headless, it preserves in amazing detail the hands, sandaled feet, and even the folds and embroidery in the fabric of his himation.

The Roman Court, renamed the Leon Levy and Shelby White Court, now soars to double its former vertical volume (fig. 2). This decision seems a mixed success.[4] On the one hand, its proportions are harmonic, and the segmental barrel vault in clear glass floods the court with light. The architects were, in fact, returning to the design that was preferred by McKim, Mead, and White in their 1912 plan but was ultimately rejected. An Ionic order tops the Doric order of the ground floor; behind the freestanding columns are walls and windows, making this upper story a kind of blind loggia. On the other hand, even monumental works such as the Hope Dionysos, set on the central axis at the far edge of the court, are dwarfed by the huge vertical volumes, and smaller statues as well as portrait heads on pedestals seem a bit lost. The grand space diminishes celebrated works such as the statue best known as the Old Market Woman. (The label now identifies her as an aged courtesan on her way to a festival of Dionysos—a somewhat unlikely interpretation—and updates her to the Julio-Claudian period.) The figures that

[1] For a detailed history of the Department of Greek and Roman Art, see Picón 2007.

[2] Dyson 2007.

[3] For brief quotes from Picón and White on this dilemma, see Mead 2007.

[4] Jeffrey L. Daly, Senior Design Advisor to the Director for Capital and Special Projects at the the Metropolitan Museum, designed the project under a plan created by Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo and Associates.

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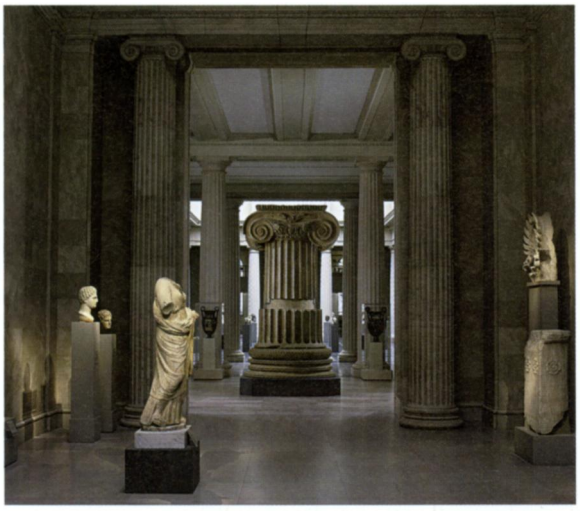

Fig. 1. View of a column from the Temple of Artemis at Sardis, with galleries beyond (© Metropolitan Museum of Art).

hold the space most effectively are the two monumental statues of Hercules, one bearded, the other youthful; they may have once adorned the baths constructed by Nero in 62 C.E. near the Pantheon. Placed opposite each other and framed by intercolumniations, the statues speak to each other and to the viewer across the space.

Moving beyond the Hope Dionysos, we find the next axis-marker, the great Badminton sarcophagus (fig. 3). It is arguably the finest sarcophagus in a North American collection, a celebration of the power of Dionysos, the pleasures of wine, and the seasons. Forty human and animal figures, exquisitely carved in high relief, animate every surface. To the right and left of the Badminton sarcophagus are groups of portrait heads, including a fine group of Antonines: Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius, Faustina the Younger, and two spectacular heads of Lucius Verus, one (from Acqua Traversa near Rome) on loan from the Louvre. Continuing clockwise around the peristyle, themes unfold case by case: funerary art from Roman Egypt, funerary art from Italy, and Hellenistic vases and glass. One meets many old friends and a few new ones among the portrait heads displayed along the left side of the peristyle.

In addition to heightening the court, the architects wished to make it level with the peristyle, rather than preserve the steps that once led down into a recreation of a Pompeian garden (complete with plants, a long pool, and a bubbling fountain). There seems to be a disconnect between the original black-and-white mosaics of the peristyle—all of them faithful to ancient prototypes—and the slick, colored granite that now paves the filled-in garden area. The design consists of a grid formed by squares that frame successively smaller squares or, alternatively, a green granite circle. Although the catalogue tries to convince us that the pavement of the Pantheon is the inspiration, the contractors seem to have made no effort to find granites and marbles that come close to the colors and veining of the Pantheon's porphyry red, verde antico, giallo antico, and cippolino: the green is gaudily veined with yellow and red; the red, with green and yellow. All this reminds one of contemporary bourgeois bathrooms rather than the Pantheon. At the center of the space is another jarring element: a highly schematic recreation of a basin by sculptor Simon Verity with a single bubbling jet at its center. The effect is understated and not a little banal. It seems that for this important space, it would have made sense to commission an artist to create a modern work, rather than a pared-down, abstract version of an ancient *labrum*.

This center point aligns with the door to the second range of gallery spaces devoted to Hellenistic art and the Hellenistic tradition, Augustan Rome, and Roman imperial art—all located along the eastern (Fifth Avenue) side of the museum. Since there are three entrances to this wing that open from the peristyle surrounding the Leon Levy and Shelby White Court, a visitor has no clear cue for how to proceed. I crossed the peristyle to enter the doorway at its midpoint, drawn by the colorful *cubiculum* from the villa at Boscoreale (fig. 4). Easily the most famous Roman painting in the United States, the newly cleaned and installed room is a delight. Although some might miss the ivory- and glass-inlaid couch that stood at the back of the room in the former installation, it is a thrill to be able to enter the room and to walk back to the alcove. What is more, one can even see the intact decoration of the spur walls framing the entryway.

It is lamentable that the mosaicists who created a facsimile of the original pavement seem to have received no advice about what such a mosaic might look like. They composed the threshold band dividing the anteroom from the alcove (usually called a *scendiletto*, or bedside carpet) from marble tiles—not tesserae. Since the tiles are fully four times the size of the white tesserae of the field, the band recalls neither a mosaic nor an *opus sectile* pavement. A consolation for those who miss the couch is that now one can examine it quite closely in a nearby gallery. It is a spectacular object

Fig. 2. The Leon Levy and Shelby White Court (© Metropolitan Museum of Art).

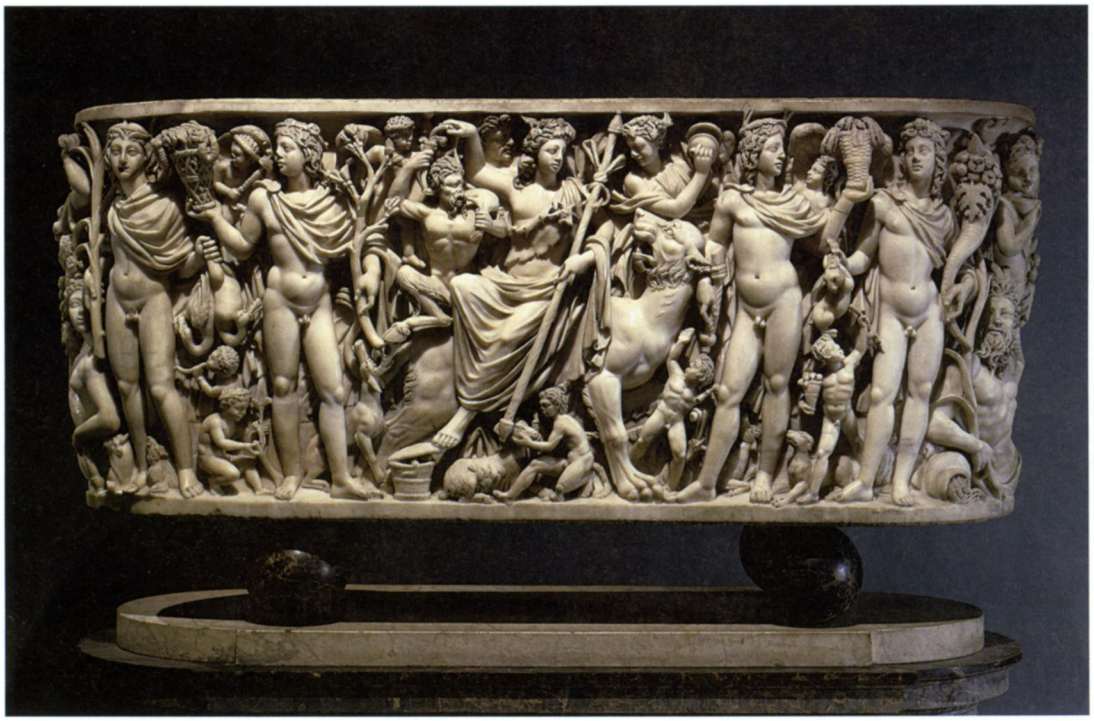

Fig 3. The Badminton sarcophagus with base (© Metropolitan Museum of Art).

in its own right, said to have come from the villa of Lucius Verus on the Via Cassia. However, I could not find the Egyptianizing (Third Style) mosaic that used to grace the floor of the *cubiculum*.

The reconstructed room for the Third Style paintings from the neighboring villa at Boscotrecase, sometimes attributed to Agrippa Postumus, disappoints (fig. 5). Admittedly, the display artists had much less to work with than with the Boscoreale *cubiculum*; the museum owns a series of panels cut from each of the rooms' three walls, leaving huge gaps in the overall composition. Yet the elegance of this black-ground decoration only comes through in a close viewing of the wonderful miniature details that are the hallmark of the Third Style: tiny portrait medallions, panels with Egyptian motifs, tendrils, and vine scrolls. The frames left around the panels are distracting: some of them are not level with the wall surface, others are embedded beneath it. Given that such decorations are entirely symmetrical, it would have been easy—and in my opinion desirable—to fill in the lacunae. If the aim was to recreate the experience of the fine abstract decoration of a whole room, this installation falls short. Full reintegration of the entire design would have been desirable. Here, too, the attempt at recreating the original mosaic is disappointing, and the barriers prevent one from approaching the walls closely to take in what, for many, is the principal delight of Third Style decoration: its fine detail.

Even more disappointing are the pieces of wall painting not integrated into period rooms: the important megalographic panels from the principal *oecus* of Boscoreale, parts of the fictive columns swagged with garlands that mirrored the real columns of the peristyle, and the fine mythological center pictures from Boscotrecase that depict Polyphemus pining after Galatea and Perseus have rescued Andromeda. Treated like pictures cemented into a wall, they look flat and strangely posterlike against the bright white walls. What is more, there is an unusual clutter of wall text and plans in this area that detracts from the effect of these paintings. They seem orphaned and in competition with each other and the wall labels.

Cases in the adjacent rooms of this eastern wing, generally devoted to Roman art of the Republic and Early Imperial periods, present engaging themes: one, on the subject of the Roman army, includes two military diplomas; another examines games and the baths. A case devoted to dining implements highlights the ingenuity of Roman craftsmen: there is a silver spoon with a folding knife for a handle, and a spoon with a fork for a handle. At the northern end of this wing is the Greek and Roman treasury, devoted to jewelry, silver, and other luxury objects. One case displays the Morgantina silver hoard, destined—like the Euphronios krater—for repatriation to Italy.

The back of the wing that terminates the long axis of the court frames the fine sarcophagi in the collection as well as an imposing bronze statue of Cybele on a cart drawn by lions. Nearby, two fine heads of Caracalla—one from a marble statue (the remaining fragments are displayed upstairs in the study gallery), another a fragmentary bronze—allow the viewer to compare the effects of the two media.

The mezzanine level presents the Etruscan collection in all its glory and complexity. Although more crowded than the ground-floor galleries, well-designed display cases combine with intelligent wall labels to guide the viewer chronologically

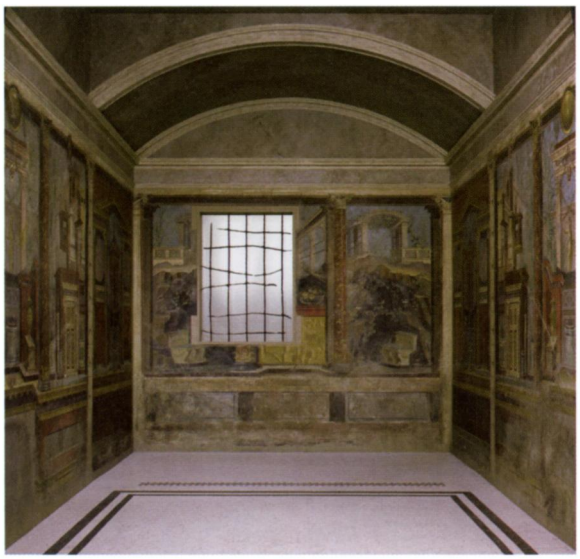

Fig. 4. Frescoes from a *cubiculum nocturnum* in Boscoreale (© Metropolitan Museum of Art).

through themes and media. Some fall short of this aim, like the case labeled "Etruscan Creativity and Greek Influence": 10 bronzes from a tomb group found at Cività Castellana sit on a lower shelf, with a variety of figural bronze vessel attachments placed above them, but there is no explanation of this influence or creativity.

The famous (now perhaps infamous, in light of recent repatriation efforts) chariot from Monteleone di Spoleto, dating to the second quarter of the sixth century B.C.E., is beautifully presented, with ample information on form, function, and the remarkable program of decoration. Riches and rarities abound, including an extensive collection of Etruscan amber and an entire case filled with bronze fittings from a cart that may have been similar in form and function to the Monteleone chariot.

The collection of Cypriot antiquities once belonging to Luigi Palma di Cesnola has not fared as well as the Etruscan antiquities. Since 2000, the Cesnola pieces, among the museum's first acquisitions in the 1870s, have stood in new galleries attached to the Near Eastern galleries on the second floor, and it is difficult to find one's way there. Although I understand the rationale for segregating these works from the Greek and Roman collections, their current placement makes it difficult for a visitor to figure out how these Greek-looking pieces fit into the visual culture of the ancient Mediterranean.

For the seasoned scholar as well as the neophyte, the glory of the new galleries is the Greek and Roman Study Collection that fills the Fifth Avenue wing of the mezzanine. Faced with the problem of displaying some 3,500 objects with their labels, the curators made the intelligent decision of creating a digital finding system for all the objects. A visitor need only remember the number of a case, go to one of the touch-screen monitors, and click on a thumbnail image to read full label information. The system is also searchable by material, time period, and theme. Given the limitations of space, I believe that this solution is far better than the alternative strategy employed for the cases in the ground-floor galleries, where the visitor has to match the labels at the bottom of the case with the accession number tags—unnecessary with the label-finder system—placed next to each object. Since there is finite space for these labels at the bottom of the case, curators often had to omit the explanatory labels for the less important objects.

As in the galleries of the ground floor, the 60 cases that make up the Study Collection pursue themes such as "Horses in Archaic Art" and "The Symposium" within an overall chronological scheme that runs from the Bronze Age to Late Imperial Rome (divisions into five periods are identified by color codes). This arrangement has the virtue of bringing together objects that might lose their cultural significance if displayed solely according to medium or chronology. An example is the display of "Amulets and Implements," where one can examine bronze pendants, amulets, and other remedies used by diverse ancient societies against the Evil Eye.

The small room at the northern extremity of the study gallery wing is devoted to temporary exhibitions. The inaugural show explores the fascinating history of the Department of Greek and Roman Art, with photographs of the original opening of the Roman Court in 1926, Dorothy Draper's redesign that put a restaurant in that space in 1954, and the opening of the new Greek galleries in 1999. Because of its modest size, this gallery is suited only for small exhibitions.

In the end, the new galleries are a triumph of exhibition design. With only a few exceptions, there is ample space and excellent lighting for the objects from the Hellenistic, Roman, and Etruscan collections that these galleries house. And in most instances, the wall texts and labels guide the visitor well. Perhaps the most enlightened curatorial decision is the creation of the study gallery, as it offers the layperson and the scholar alike the opportunity to explore the less spectacular objects that otherwise would be consigned to cramped storage facilities in most public museums.

In terms of pedagogy, however, the catalogue of the classical collections published in time for the grand opening does little to complement the wealth of information available in the study gallery and from the labels throughout the

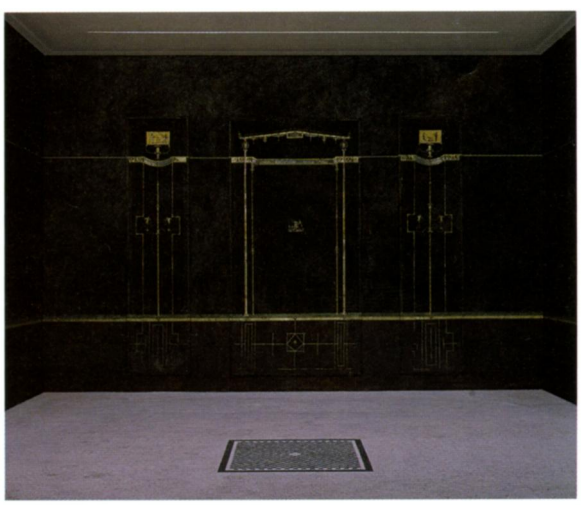

Fig. 5. Frescoes in a reconstructed *cubiculum nocturnum* from Boscotrecase (© Metropolitan Museum of Art).

galleries. Heavy and expensive, it is essentially a picture-book with excellent color photographs of 476 objects; although the photographs are keyed to catalogue entries, there are no bibliographical references.[5]

It is commonplace that for museum curators, the most contentious struggle is the one for space. Picón clearly has won this turf war. To one who has witnessed, over the years, the relentless shrinking of the exhibition space for classical art at the museum, it is a delight to visit the new galleries. The clear logic of the installation, the emphasis on the interchange of themes and styles among objects of different scale and medium, and the overall pedagogical framework are a quantum leap for the museum's distinguished collections

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[5] See Ridgway (2007) for a review.